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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6745
INFO RUCNCOM/EC CARICOM COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS PORT OF SPAIN 000505

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E.O. 12958: N/A
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SUBJECT: PANDAY NO LONGER OPPOSITION LEADER; KAMLA STEPS UP

Ref A: Port of Spain 00488

11. (U) Basdeo Panday is no longer Leader of the Opposition due to his April 24 conviction (reftel). The Office of the President issued a notice midday on April 25 removing Panday from his position as Leader of the Opposition as he can no longer legally function as a member of parliament.

12. (SBU) Constitutionally, the President had no choice but to revoke Panday's appointment. Even though Panday is not yet required to vacate his seat for at least 30 days to allow time for an appeal, he immediately ceases to function as a parliamentarian. Still, the alacrity with which the President made the announcement has raised eyebrows within the UNC.

KAMLA STEPS UP

13. (U) Eight opposition Members of Parliament threw their support behind Panday loyalist Kamla Persad-Bissessar to fill the now-vacant Leader of the Opposition slot. She does not command the support of all 15 Opposition MPs, with backbenchers Gillian Lucky and Fuad Khan, marginalized Chief Whip Ganga Singh and now-independent Gerald Yetming all declaring their support for Winston Dookeran. Still, the UNC Executive delivered a letter to the President at approximately 1750 on April 25 indicating that Persad-Bissessar had the support of the majority of sitting opposition Members of Parliament. UNC Deputy Political Leader Jack Warner quipped that he hopes the President will move as quickly in appointing Persad-Bissessar as Leader of the Opposition as he did in revoking Panday's position. The President complied, and confirmed Persad-Bissessar as the first female Leader of the Opposition in T&T's history on April 26. This is not the first time she's broken ground in women's equality in T&T. In 1995, she became the first female Attorney General.

14. (SBU) COMMENT: Persad-Bissessar is a charismatic and dynamic speaker, and fiercely loyal to Panday, making her a natural choice to follow in his footsteps. In fact, we suspect that Panday personally selected her to be his successor, indicating that he is still calling the shots in the party. From her prior government experience, we have indications that Persad-Bissessar has a pro-U.S. bent. END COMMENT.

15. (SBU) Bio note on Persad-Bissessar:

-Born April 4, 1952. Attended the University of the West Indies and obtained a Bachelor's Degree in 1974 and a Diploma in Education in 1976. Subsequently, she worked as a lecturer in language and linguistics at the University of the West Indies and as a teacher at Lakshmi Girl's Hindu

College (a secondary school).

-She attended the Hugh Wooding Law School in 1985, and worked in the chambers of Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj until she started her own practice in 1998.

-Persad-Bissessar was appointed an Opposition Senator in November 1994, and was elected as representative from Siparia in November 1995.

-On November 9, 1995, she was appointed the first female Attorney General in the country. She held the post until February 2 1996, when Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj was appointed Attorney General and she became Minister of Legal Affairs.

AUSTIN